

The Magickers

TERRY DOWLING

If you had the power to perform one—and only one—act of magic, what would it be? Pick carefully, now . . .

One of the best-known and most celebrated Australian writers in any genre, winner of eleven Ditmar Awards and three Aurealis Awards, Terry Dowling (www.terrydowling.com) made his first sale in 1982, and has since made an international reputation for himself as a writer of science fiction, dark fantasy, and horror. Primarily a short-story writer, he is the author of the linked collections Rynosseros, Blue Tyson, Twilight Beach, Worm-wood, An Intimate Knowledge of the Night, and Blackwater Days, as well as An-tique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling, The Man Who Lost Red, and Basic Black: Tales of Appropriate Fear. He has written three computer adventures: Mysteri-ous Journey: Schizm, Mysterious journey II: Chameleon, and Sentinel: Descen-dants in Time, and as editor has produced The Essential Ellison, Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF (with Van Ikin), and The Jack Vance Treasury (with Jonathan Strahan), Born in Sydney, he lives in Hunters Hill, New South Wales, Australia.

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WICE upon a time there was someone named Samuel Raven Pardieu. The first to bear the name was a nineteenth-century blacksmith who tried his hand as a toother during the Napoleonic War. In the morning following the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, while collecting teeth from the newly killed to sell to dentists in the big cities, he was spotted by an English patrol and shot as a looter.

The second Samuel Raven Pardieu was that man's great-to-the-fifth-grandson, and on the morning of 24 May 2006, this second Sam, two weeks past his fourteenth birthday, one full month after enrolling in the special classes at Dessida, was sitting in his favourite spot in all of the sprawling Dessida estate when Bettina Anders found him.

"I knew you'd be here," Bettina said in that special know-it-all tone she had. "Haven't forgotten what today is?"

“Of course not,” Sam said, as if he could, as if he needed to be reminded. Key Interview Day. His first one-on-one interview with Lucius Prandt, one of the world’s greatest magicians.

The real surprise was that Bettina was bothering to talk to him at all. In his four weeks at Dessida, in both the ordinary curriculum classes and the special Magikker classes they shared day after day, she hadn’t spoken more than a few dozen words to him. Now here she was, this stand-offish fourteen-year-old, the one the other eighteen students, Sam included, called the Princess behind her back, pretending to be friendly. Pretending. It couldn’t be genuine.

Sam was sitting in his special spot, of course. There were twelve stone plinths flanking the old ornamental approach to the front steps of the main house at Dessida, twelve marble pedestals hopelessly overgrown with thorn-bushes and bracken except for this one, the one Sam had cleared himself and now occupied. The large house stood on its rise behind them, overlooking the grounds of the sprawling country estate.

Bettina didn’t leave. That was another marvel. She simply stood there, dark-haired and, yes, princess pretty if you thought about it at all, and just seemed to be watching the day.

“Well, I hope it goes well,” she said, and astonished him even more.

Sam couldn’t fathom it. Bettina Anders saying such a thing. And with it came another thought: what does she know about my Key Interview that I don’t? What happens at a Key Interview with Lucius? Should I ask her?

Sam played it safe and said nothing. Why ask only to have her snub him again? He’d been gazing at what lay concealed in the thorn-bushes between the plinths when she’d arrived. Now he looked out over the estate as well, the spacious grounds set amid these rolling green hills under a brilliant autumn sky. He was determined not to let Bettina Anders know what he’d really been looking at. That was his secret, his one special thing at Dessida.

But she lingered. Against all reason, all sense, Bettina stayed.

“So, do you have your question ready,” she said.

“My what?”

“Key Interview Day is also First Question Day, if no-one’s told you. Lucius will probably ask you to ask one. He usually does.”

Sam couldn’t help himself. “A question? What question?”

“Ahhh,” Bettina said, which translated as: *So, you didn’t know?* “Just what I said. He’ll ask if *you* have a question. Do you?”

“*One* question. I’ve got lots of questions. Like when do the *real* magic classes start. Not just these mind exercises we keep doing all the time.”

“You need to be patient,” Bettina said, and looked anything but that herself. “It’s worth it.”

It struck Sam right then that she’d been *told* to come and find him, to say all this. With two months’ more experience at Dessida, she was probably following someone’s instructions, a script of some kind. Maybe Lucius had sent her himself. It was certainly possible.

“Where would *you* rather be right now, Bettina?” he said, and could see he had surprised her.

“What?”

“This is *my* spot. I love sitting here, just watching the grounds and the house. But you don’t want to be here now. Where would *you* *rather* be?”

The old Bettina defiance was back in a flash. She couldn’t help herself. “You’re so smart and stand-offish. You tell me!”

Stand-offish! That threw Sam. That couldn’t be right. He wasn’t the stand-offish one!

“Well, I haven’t known you long, but it has to be the top of that tower,” Sam said, and pointed back up the hill to Dessida’s huge front doors at the end of the overgrown approach promenade. Above that big doorway rose a modest central tower, three storeys tall, with a big bronze bell on an ornate stand at the top and a flag flying on a flag-pole. “Or be-side the lake, down behind the trees there. Somewhere away and safe.”

Bettina stared at him, not because he was necessarily right in naming either place—how could he possibly know?—but probably because of that final sentence

and final word.

The look between them might have been special except that Bettina, was guarding, was more protective about some things than even Sam was. His last comment had probably been too close to the mark. She had to say something to deal with the vulnerability it brought with it.

“As if I’d tell you,” she said, like “Princess” Bettina on any other day. “And don’t think I don’t know why you like sitting here. I can see your silly statue down in there.” She gestured at the thicket beyond the plinth where Sam sat, then stalked off towards the house.

Sam could have hated her right then, watching her go, but knew that such an emotion was to cover something else, just like Bettina’s own sudden outburst. She was guarding, protecting herself. Sam was doing the same.

“It’s the only one left!” he might have called after her as she disappeared through the double doorway. But he didn’t. He looked instead at the toppled form hidden in the thorn thicket, a figure of dirty white stone, the same old marble as the plinths, toppled and abandoned long ago.

Whatever statuary had adorned the other plinths was long gone. The house itself was maintained well enough, but the grounds of the Dessida estate had definitely seen better days.

Let her tell the other students about the statue. Let her tell their three teachers or the other staff, Lucius himself for all he cared.

And stand-offish! How dare she!

Sam looked at his watch: 9:45. Almost time.

Key Interview. Just him and Lucius at last!

But Bettina had no reason to lie. First Question Day. What would he ask? What did one ask the man who was probably the world’s greatest magician, having been hand-picked by him from hundreds, no, literally thousands of other boys and girls across Australia, across the world, if what the Prandt testing officers had said was true? Hand-picked and *paid* to come to Dessida in the Southern Highlands on a Prandt Scholarship to hone his latent skills, become a magician or magikker, whatever that was. It had never been made clear.

That had to be the question.

What's the difference between a Magician and a Magikker?

Sam looked at his watch again: 9:50. And that was when Martin Mayhew appeared in Dessida's big double doorway, happy Martin, always smiling, always happy to be in the world. Tall, blond, and handsome, Nordic-looking and easy in his buff-coloured house fatigues and sandals, greeting every morning with his arms spread wide and his head back, if the stories were true, breathing in the day. Martin was in charge of the house-hold staff, and here he was to make sure that Sam didn't miss his 10 A.M. meeting.

Martin gave a big sweeping gesture of summons. "It's time, Sam!"

"Take care, Rufio," Sam called to the stone figure lying in the thicket, his special name for his secret friend. Then he was up in a flash, off the plinth and up the steps.

"Rufio?" Martin asked as they headed for Lucius Prandt's large office in the north-western wing.

"My name for him," Sam said. "He's the only one left. Do you remember the others?" Sam knew he could ask Martin things like this and be safe about it.

"Sorry, Best Sam. Before my time, I'm afraid. But ask Master Lucius. He'll know. He's lived here all his life. You're allowed to bring up things like that during your interview."

"Anyone else scheduled today, Martin?" Sam had to ask it.

Martin shook his head. "Not today. Today is your day, Sam. Lucius has been looking forward to it."

Then they were at the large oaken door to Lucius Prandt's private office, and Martin was knocking.

"Good luck, Best Sam," Martin said, opening the door for him.

And in Sam went.

It was a wonderful room, Sam saw, a true magician's room, large and high-ceilinged, with bookcases lining most of the wood-panelled walls and

fabulous miniature engines of glass and metal working away on a bench top to one side. Against the far wall was a suit of medieval armour with—
incredibly!—two heads, two fiercely snouted, visored helmets set side re-side on big spiky shoulders. Where could *that* have come from? Sam won-dered. How could it be real? There were maps on the walls between the bookshelves: Mercator projections of land after fabulous land with exotic names like Sabertanis Major and Andastaban Arcanus. Small pins with de-mon heads fastened maps atop others in some places, there were so many.

Lucius Prandt's huge desk was set on a raised dais before four tall lead-light windows that opened onto views of the lawns and forests of Dessida. windows that framed glimpses of rolling hills and held great masses of fluffy cumulus in an aching blue sky.

So many things sat on that wide wonderful desk, but most noticeable were the three planetary globes Sam had learned about in his Introduction to Magic classes. The closest was the Earth as Sam knew it, but joined by seventeen silver threads to the second, which was the Overworld, set with its spelltowers and mage-points. That orb was joined in turn by red wire to the third, which represented the Underworld, all blacks and reds, with threads of hot bright copper picking out the various Sunder Points.

But Lucius Prandt wasn't at his desk. He sat in one of two big arm-chairs before a fire-place in which was set not a conventional fire but rather a slowly turning image of a burning city.

"Welcome, Sam," Lucius said, standing to greet him, shaking his hand warmly. He wore true-wizard black, of course: soft black woollen top, black slacks, black shoes. None of the star-and-moon robes or mysterious pentagram stuff he wore for his concerts and television performances, not today. His dark eyes glittered under silver-grey hair that swept back like a wave. He was in his late fifties, they said, but others had told Sam that a zero should be added to any age you felt tempted to put him at. Lucius Prandt, they said, had been present at the death of the ancient city that burned forever in his fire-place.

It was difficult for Sam not to keep glancing this way and that, studying some new thing or other that suddenly caught his eye. But at last he made himself sit in the other armchair and face Lucius, who was pouring them both glasses of fruit-juice from a crystal decanter.

"I've been looking forward to this, Sam," he said as he handed Sam a glass. "Your studies have been going well, I hear, and I thought it was time we met

properly. We have questions for each other, I know, and you'll get to ask them all over the next few weeks. No doubt you've been told to have a special question ready for me right now, so let's get that out of the way so we can relax properly."

Sam felt a weight go from him. He set his glass down on a side table and didn't hesitate. "What's the difference between a Magikker and a Magician?"

"Straight to the heart of it. Good. That's an important question, and I thank you for it. There have been many true magicians in the history of the world—gifted men and women—but not really that many ever became the fullest quantity meant by that name. Most so-called magicians only ever had bits and pieces of the gift. But I bet you could even name some of the real ones."

"Well, Merlin for a start?"

"Definitely one of the lucky ones, Sam, one of the very few."

"Yourself. Lucius Prandt." It seemed appropriate to say it.

Lucius gave his wonderful smile. "Good of you to say so, but no, Sam. I'm only an illusionist. That's what most magicians are these days—people who create wonderful illusions, learn to be clever enough to use people's perceptions against them. That's nothing compared to real magic, of course, just fakery and fancy tricks, a knowledge of optics and sleight of hand, but sometimes it just has to do. But I *was* a true Magician for a short time, Sam. Seems a lot of us have a bit of the gift, just a bit and just for a short time, some evolutionary holdover from when the mind fired differently. It's almost as if evolution started to take us down a different road, then got side-tracked."

Lucius paused to top up their glasses. "The thing is, most of us lose any traces of this gift by the time we become adults and never even know we've had it. It comes out in crisis situations mostly—a child lifts a fallen tree off an injured playmate. He could never have lifted such a load before. Suddenly he can. Another kid moves a parked car to free a trapped pet. Never knows how she did it. Another pictures the hand of someone buried in a land-slide half a continent away, maybe tells the right people in time. When they check, they find the person still alive, just a hand showing. It's the birthright gift, the power some of us are born with and soon lose."

"But you had it."

"I certainly did. For seventeen precious and amazing years. That's an

incredibly long time. I was lucky. The memory of it made me become an illusionist. But for a short time I was a *Magician*, Sam! The real thing!”

“And I am?” Sam had to ask it. Why else was he here?

“Straight to it again, Sam. Good. You are—in a small way and for a short time. You may never have known it before coming to Dessida, but you are.”

“All those tests at school—”

“Were to prove it. Passed off as aptitude tests and personality indicators, all approved by the School Board and the Department of Education. They never knew otherwise. This year alone we’ve tested everyone at three hundred and fifty-two schools so far. You’re the only one we’ve found.”

Sam was amazed. “The *only* one?”

“Others had bits of a gift but were temperamentally unsuited or had family complications. They were better left as they were, undeveloped and unknowing. For their own sakes, really. I hope you understand.”

“So what about my training here? The six months’ tuition?”

“You want to be an illusionist?”

“Not if I’m a Magician!”

“Perfect answer! See, we picked well. So let’s get back to your question. A Magician with a capital M has the gift for life, just like Merlin and Sancreoch and Quen Dargentis, the Black Mage of Constantinople. But most are what we call Magikkers—people with a tiny bit of the gift, a single burst they can use once and once only, you hear what I’m saying? In magical parlance, we call them singletons. Magikkers.”

“And I’m a—a singleton? A Magikker?”

“Sam, you are. You have *one* magic act within you. A single magnificent spell. One big gush of power. It will all come rushing out at once, then be gone.”

“Then—then I should wait. I should keep it until I really need it.”

“Doesn’t work like that. The older you get, the sooner it’ll just fade away.

It's gone for most Magikkers well before they turn twenty."

"But—but Lucius ..." Sam couldn't finish.

"Yes, Sam. You have to take my word that this is how it is. I've spent years researching and searching."

"For these—Magikkers?"

"Indeed."

"So you're saying I should use my gift soon."

"You should. And there's an alternative. A suggestion I would like to put to you now."

"What's that, Lucius?"

"Sam, I want you to give *me* your magic."

Sam was amazed. "Give it to you?"

"You have so little—one spell at most, a single act, probably limited in all sorts of ways—but whatever it is, however it is, I'd like you to give it to me."

The request stunned Sam. He felt a new weight settle on his spirit, a new hard emotion surging up. He quickly realised what it was. Disappointment. Disillusionment. "That's why I'm really here, isn't it? Why we're all really here?"

Lucius nodded. "Yes, Sam, it is."

"But it's *mine*," Sam said. "My gift. How could I *give* it? How could that be possible?" And behind those words, the unspoken ones: Why should I? How could you ask it?

"I can't help you there, Sam. That has to be your decision. It truly does have to be your decision. I just wanted to let you know how it is and what I'd like you to do for me."

The disappointment Sam felt took all the charm from the room, emptied the excitement and happiness out of the day. He wanted to be gone, needed to be

anywhere else. "So I can leave whenever I want? I don't have to stay?"

"Dessida isn't a prison, Sam. You can leave anytime you want. We'll drive you to the station at Milton, even give you a certificate saying you've completed some important vocational training."

"But I'll lose my chance."

"Only to be here with me. Taking our classes. To have us help you use that gift."

"Give away that gift." Sam's words sounded bitter. He couldn't help it. "And they're *illusionist* classes. Not the real thing."

"Afraid so, Sam. Once your magic is used up, that's all we have to console us."

"You don't."

"I assure you, Sam, I do. That's why I'm asking for your magic. One illusionist talking to a young man who may one day become another."

"Once my magic is gone."

"Once your magic is gone, yes."

"So you can have another taste!" Sam said the words savagely. He was so angry, so disappointed. This wonderful man, wonderful place, wonderful chance had been ruined in a moment.

"I—I need to go and think."

Lucius stood. "Of course you do. It's right that you do. I wanted to be direct with you about this. But, Sam, please know. Whatever you decide will be the right thing."

Before Sam quite knew it, he found himself out in the corridor again, hurrying back towards the front of the house. He felt numb. He needed to be gone, to be out in the day, somewhere else, anywhere else. He rushed down the front steps and sat on his plinth again, but this time he didn't greet Rufio. He couldn't bring himself to.

Everything was the same. Everything was different. Dessida still stood at the end of its once-grand promenade, still loomed there—an impressive, two-storeyed, nineteenth-century mansion on its gentle rise. But now Sam saw all over again how run-down it truly was: the lawns in need of mowing, the weeds in the gravel of the approach walk. The gardens to either side were overgrown with briars too, not just the pedestals flanking the path.

So much for Lucius Prandt's magic. He couldn't even keep his estate in order, couldn't even manage a "glamour" to hide how it really was.

Sam left the plinth and set off across the lawns towards the estate's western border. Members of the household staff watched him go. Standing with their rakes and gardening tools, they tracked him with their bright curious eyes.

That just angered Sam further. They stood about with rakes and implements like that, yet always seemed to be doing more talking and day-dreaming than actual work. Well, let them watch. Let them wonder.

Finally, Sam reached the low wall of grey-brown fieldstone that marked Dessida's western boundary. He leant on the waist-high barrier, glanced at it stretching this way and that off through the trees, then looked out at the world beyond, *his* world, sweeping away in fields and suddenly precious vistas.

How dare Lucius! How dare he!

Sam could so easily jump that wall and be gone. He felt his body tens-ing for it.

"Hey, Best Sam!"

The voice reached him through the forest, and when Sam turned, there was that gangly, elderly groundswoman, Ren Bartay, heading towards him. She was tall and sun-tanned and was whacking the taller weeds with a stick as she came, a big smile on her face.

"Isn't it just a day?" Ren called, grinning away. "I love this time of year."

And then, when she was right up close: "Thinking of bailing out, eh, Sam? It's an easy leap."

"Seriously considering it, Ren," Sam replied. Why not say it, he figured. Like Lucius had said, it was his choice to make.

“Don’t blame you,” Ren surprised him by saying. “The magic is all used up here.”

“Is it?”

“First Interview Day. You know it is. You’re the only one with a bit right now.”

“If that’s true. If *any* of it’s true. What about the others? Bettina and Susan and Crip and the rest? There are eighteen other—”

“Already given. Already gone. Never really had any.” Ren set down her stick and started checking that the stones were securely packed atop this section of wall.

“I can’t be the only one!”

“Right now you are,” she said, turning back. “Lucius would have asked you for it, yes? First Interview Day.”

“But if they’ve given theirs, why do they stay on? How can they stand it?”

Ren looked off through the trees, then pointed to a spot well inside the wall. “Because *how* they used their magic is still here—in almost every case.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me show you.”

They started walking back towards Dessida together, then made a detour south so they entered the thickest part of the forest.

In the dappled autumn light, Sam saw things—structures—amid the trees. To his left there was a cottage, a full-size picture-book gingerbread house with smoke curling from the chimney, smoke that vanished six metres above the chimney-pot before ever reaching the open air.

“That’s Bettina Anders’s creation,” Ren said. “The Eternal House. How she used her single magic act. Step inside, you’ll meet her grand-mother Dika, her grandfather Brent. There’s always music playing, always something cooking, always a welcome at their table. Couldn’t do some-thing like that away from

Dessida, Sam. Lucius explained it to Bettina very carefully. You can't bring people back from the dead, put them back in the world, without causing a real fuss. Wouldn't be right. That sort of fix-up needs to be done very discreetly."

Then Ren pointed to a twisted and, yes, *twisting* tower off to the right. It glowed like amber in the soft light streaming through the trees. "That's Sophie Ramage's Living Tower. She would've preferred it in her own back-yard, of course, but Lucius made her see that people would gawp and gape and never leave her alone. They'd be forever wanting to know how it was possible, where it came from. She'd never have a moment's peace, what with intruders and souvenir-hunters breaking off bits and pieces. Here it stays intact and hers! She'll be able to come see it anytime she wants."

"And that's what it's all about," Sam said, more annoyed than ever. "Lucius can't do magic anymore, so this way he gets other people's mar-vels! Talks them out of keeping them."

"Sam, Sam," Ren said, in her wonderful calming voice. "See it another way. These were done by Magikkers who *didn't* give Lucius their magic! The things they used it for have been left here for safekeeping. *Discarded* here if you think about it."

Sam tried to grasp the sense of what Ren was saying. "But Lucius wouldn't be able to convince everyone, surely."

"You're right. So he exercises an important custodial role, a true duty of care, and uses hypnosis. He makes them *forget* that they ever had the gift in the first place. He can't let them go back into their everyday lives and do some outlandish thing or other. Not once they know about the gift. So they leave Dessida thinking they've been given some training in basic illusionist skills, that's all. They go away, and the magic dies in them, then everything's okay."

Sam felt a moment of panic. "I still remember all this! He hasn't hypnotized me!"

"You haven't jumped the wall yet."

"What! If I jump it and run away, I'll forget!"

Ren grinned. "Just kidding, Best Sam. Lucius picks his Magikkers very carefully. Mostly it works out fine. He rarely has to resort to mind-tricks. You still have your gift to use. He'd *rather* you use it than lose it."

“He’d rather I give it to him.”

“Oh yes. He’d much rather that,” Ren said, smiling and, before Sam could ask why, added: “But for a very good reason. One I’m duty-sworn never to reveal.”

That made Sam stop and think. He liked old Ren. It made the anger subside a bit. “But how can I give *my* magic to *him*?”

Ren’s smile never wavered. “See what a special boy you are, Sam? You said ‘how can I’ not ‘why should I.’ That’s a nice distinction, especially when you’re feeling like you are right now.”

“I’m serious, Ren. *How* could I give it to him?”

But Ren just put a finger to her lips as if to say: Can’t tell. Can’t tell. Keeping a secret! Then she seemed to change her mind a bit. “Well, the Magikkers who worked their spells here certainly didn’t do it. Bettina insisted on her cottage. Sophie had to have her tower. Over there you see Kristi Paul’s Magical Soda Well and Grant Hennessey’s Nifty Golden Treasure Mill. *They* certainly didn’t give their magic to Lucius.”

“But he would’ve asked for it.”

“Certainly did. First Interview Day every time.”

“But if it’s *my* birthright gift, *mine* to use, how can I give it?”

They seemed to be in a loop. “Exactly,” Ren Bartay said. “How could you give your bit of magic to someone else?”

Then, just like that, without another word, she turned and headed back towards Dessida.

Sam watched her go, saw the tall spry woman stop to exchange a word or two with other household staff doing grounds work—first Carla, then Jeffrey—then saw her hurry on.

What had she told them? What?

No way to know, so Sam turned back to the marvels laid out amid the trees:

Bettina's cottage with its endless plume of cookfire smoke and—to hear Ren Bartay tell it—endless happiness within, lost happiness found again; Sophie's miraculous twisting tower, curving on itself like so much settling honey; Grant's mill glinting and cycling away. He heard the fizz from Kristi's well too, heard other wonderful sounds coming through the forest from who knew how many other wonders hidden there? Sam realized he could probably spend hours, days, weeks here exploring what else was laid out among the trees, what years of other Magikkers had chosen.

Because they *wouldn't* give Lucius their magic!

Sam marveled at it. Just how long had Lucius been bringing Magikkers here from all across the world, asking for their bits of the gift?

Which made Sam think further. What single thing did Lucius hope for with the piece of magic Sam carried within him? What was it that Ren—or Martin, or Lucius for that matter—wouldn't tell him?

Sam couldn't fathom the purpose, of course, but suddenly he did realize something. He would know *none* of this, nothing of what Magikkers were and about this gift he had if it weren't for Lucius, weren't for the testing and the Prandt Scholarship that had brought him here.

He owed Lucius for that, and it took the last of the anger out of him.

And blossoming up behind that realization came something else. Sam knew right then *how* he could give his magic to Lucius, and it was so obvious, so simple.

He ran, actually ran back to the main house, making more sudden Sam-commotion in the peace of the day. Grounds staff stood leaning on their rakes or left off sweeping the paths to watch him rush by.

What were they thinking? Sam asked himself as he ran. Here comes the magic boy, the First Interview Day Boy. Best Sam. But what did they think, what did they know, smiling and wondering like that?

Sam saw other students watching him too. Susan and Crip and Hagrib were on the south terrace, Sanford and Nettie by the fountain. And there, there at the top of the tower, leaning on the balustrade, yes, was Princess Bettina, watching from her safe place.

Sam didn't care. He deliberately turned into the old approach promenade,

deliberately let her see him run past the plinths and thorn-bushes. He called "Hi there, Rufio!" as he rushed past, just as he'd always done, then he leapt the steps three at a time and plunged into the cool familiar gloom of Dessida's front hall.

Martin Mayhew was waiting for him there, of course.

"Best Sam, what's afoot?" Martin asked.

"I have to see Lucius again, Martin! I need to ask him something!"

"About your interview?"

"About my gift."

"Then I'm sure he'll see you."

And Lucius did, almost immediately. Martin needed only a moment to go in first to explain, then Sam was ushered into the leather chairs, and Martin was once again closing the door behind him.

Sam dropped into the armchair opposite Lucius, just as he had an hour before.

Lucius had already put aside the book he'd been reading. "What is it, Sam?"

"I know how I can give you my magic."

"You do? And so?"

"I want to."

"I thank you. How does that work then?"

"*You* tell me what you want *me* to do. Then I do it for you."

"But I can't," Lucius said.

"What's that?"

"I can't come out and tell you, Sam. It's an oath I took. A condition I imposed on myself. A rule of governance from way back. I'm not *allowed* to tell. It all has to come from you. You're the Magikker-in-command right now. I'm just an

illusionist.”

“But you can hypnotize me. Plant an activating command of some kind. Then instead of days and weeks of learning how to use an activation spell one time only, you put in a trigger so all I have to do is say what I want. What *I* think you want. You can at least do that.”

“True. I can. I’ve done it before.”

“I know. I guessed. That’s what you’re the expert at. Making it quick and easy. Helping it happen.”

Lucius smiled. “So how do we proceed, Best of Sams? I still can’t say what I want you to do with your gift.”

“Lucius, I think I know what you want.”

Lucius’s eyes glittered with unreadable emotion. “Oh? Yes?”

“So go ahead. Plant the hypnotic cue.”

“I planted it earlier today. While you were watching my burning city there.”

Sam glanced quickly at the strange shape turning in the fireplace, then looked back. “Then call the Dessida staff together.”

Lucius’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “The staff?”

“The three teachers too. All of them. Have them gather out by the front steps.”

Lucius turned to an intercom by his chair, pressed a button. “Martin. Dessida One! Ring the bell!”

And moments later the bell in the tower started tolling over and over. Out in the fields, back in the kitchen and service rooms and private quarters, the household staff would be leaving off what they were doing and heading for the front of the house.

They were all assembled there when Lucius and Sam stepped through the big double doorway at the top of the steps. The group stood as if for some anniversary photograph, smiling, attentive, and curious, Martin Mayhew and Ren

Bartay among them.

Sam grinned back. He was right. In an instant he'd counted them and knew he was right.

Eight household staff. Three teachers. A total of eleven.

Eleven of the twelve plinths.

Sam gestured then, just as he'd seen magicians and wizards and sorcerers do all his life in countless picture books and movies.

"Make room for number twelve!" he shouted. "Rufio, come out here! It's your turn!"

There was scratching and scrambling in the thicket, then out came Ru-fio, already in house fatigues, limber and strong and smiling with happiness.

"Welcome to the staff, Rufio!" Sam called.

"Thank you, Best Sam!" Rufio called back with his brand-new voice, and did just that, moved in among the others.

That was when Sam noticed that next to him Lucius was weeping, that tears brightened his cheeks in the late-morning light.

"Thank you, Best Sam. Thank you for this."

"It means I'll have to stay on and become an illusionist now, doesn't it?" Sam said.

"Oh, it does," Lucius agreed. "And I'm sure that's what Rufio and our friends here want more than anything."

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